



## Alone in The Crowd

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Aved Ryan

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**AVED RYAN**

## INTRODUCTION:"PASSING FACES"

By Dr. Robert Marlow

They say that everyone has a story. But what about those who witness thousands of stories each day? What about the silent observers—those who stand at life's crossroads, watching ?as we all rush past

I never met Thomas Fisher. Not while he was alive, anyway. His journals came to me through a series of coincidences that I've come to view as something more than chance. Three cardboard boxes, water-stained and heavy with the weight of seventeen notebooks, delivered to my office by the building superintendent of a nondescript apartment complex in the eastern part of the city. "Found these when we cleared out 4B," he'd said with a shrug.

"Guy had your business card taped to his fridge. Thought maybe you'd want 'em before we  
".tossed everything

My business card? I had no recollection of ever giving my card to anyone named Thomas Fisher. Perhaps he'd picked it up somewhere—my office is only four blocks from the Harrison Street Station where he worked. Or maybe he'd found it discarded on a train. I'll  
.never know

What I do know is that I spent the next three weeks immersed in the mind of one of the most  
.fascinating individuals I've never met

Thomas Fisher died on November, 14, 2022. The official cause was heart failure, though the circumstances remain... peculiar. His body was found sitting upright on a bench at Platform 3 of Harrison Street Station, almost twenty-four hours after his shift had ended. According to the police report, commuters had walked past him for an entire day, assuming he was just another tired passenger or perhaps homeless person taking shelter. It wasn't until a maintenance worker—Michael Stone, who features prominently in these pages—noticed that Thomas hadn't moved position since the previous day that anyone realized something was  
.wrong

Thomas was 42 years old. He lived alone. No family came forward to claim his body or possessions. No friends attended his funeral. His entire existence might have evaporated  
.without a trace, were it not for these journals

I've been practicing psychiatry for over twenty years. I've treated hundreds of patients, read countless clinical accounts of dissociative disorders, paranoia, and social isolation. But never have I encountered such a raw, unflinching chronicle of human loneliness—and human  
.observation

To be clear: I never treated Thomas Fisher professionally. I have no right to posthumously diagnose him, though many of my colleagues who've read portions of these journals have been quick to assign labels. Schizotypal personality disorder, they suggest. Paranoid  
.delusions. Dissociative episodes

.Maybe. Probably. I don't know

What I do know is that these journals contain something rare: truth. Not objective truth, perhaps—Thomas's perception of reality became increasingly... flexible as his isolation deepened. But emotional truth. The truth of what it means to stand apart from the world  
.while watching it rush by

Some readers will no doubt question my decision to publish these journals in their entirety, unedited and unexpurgated. Wouldn't it be more "responsible" to contextualize them? To  
?separate fact from fiction, to explain away Thomas's more unusual perceptions

.No. That would be... wrong. A violation

I remember staring at page 341, where Thomas's handwriting suddenly shifts mid-sentence, becoming larger, more frantic—the moment when he first describes seeing multiple versions of the red-haired girl appearing simultaneously. My instinct was to footnote it, to offer some clinical explanation. But then I realized that by doing so, I would be committing the very crime Thomas railed against: refusing to SEE people as they are

So I've done nothing to these pages except arrange them chronologically. The occasional gaps and inconsistencies remain. The increasingly disturbed penmanship in later entries is preserved. Even the coffee stains and teardrops—and yes, there were teardrops on several pages—have been carefully reproduced

I've written this brief introduction only to provide context for how these journals came into my possession. Thomas's voice needs no interpreter. His observations need no expert analysis

What happened to Thomas Fisher? Did he simply die of heart failure after years of solitude? Or did something break inside him when he finally stood in the center of Harrison Station, screaming into a crowd that couldn't—or wouldn't—hear him

I don't know

But sometimes... late at night... I find myself on Platform 3 of Harrison Station. Watching. Waiting. Looking for the red-haired girl. The silent old man. The man with the leather  
briefcase

I never see them

But I wonder if they see me

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February 3, 2023

## CHAPTER ONE: ME AND THE CROWD

From the journals of Thomas Fisher

April 17, 2022

Seven thousand four hundred and twelve

That's how many faces passed through my booth today. I counted. Not all of them, obviously—that would be impossible. Just the ones between 7:30 and 9:15 AM. Rush hour. When they all pour down the stairs like water through a broken dam

I used to think they looked like ants. That's what everyone says, right? "Oh, the commuters look like ants from above." But that's wrong. Ants have purpose. Ants communicate. Ants .touch antennae and share information and work together

These people don't touch. They don't see. They move in carefully practiced patterns .designed specifically to avoid contact. Eyes down. Shoulders hunched. Headphones in

God, the headphones. When did that happen? Five years ago, maybe half of them wore headphones. Now it's almost all of them. Little white sticks poking out of their ears like .they're being remote controlled by some unseen puppeteer

I wonder what they're all listening to. Probably nothing. Probably just have them in to avoid .conversation

.Smart

April 18, 2022

My booth is 4 feet by 6 feet. Glass on three sides. Industrial beige paint peeling on the back wall. There's a dent next to the door from when Ramirez used to kick it open before they .transferred him to Westside Station. That was three years ago. Nobody's fixed the dent

Nobody fixes anything here. The light in the men's restroom has been flickering for two months. The second bench on Platform 3 has had a broken slat since Christmas. The digital .sign on Platform 2 shows arrival times that are always seven minutes off

Seven minutes. Not five, not ten. Seven. I've timed it. I've asked maintenance why. They .shrug

Nobody notices. Nobody complains. They just stand there, staring at a sign telling them a .train will arrive in 2 minutes, and then stand there for 9 minutes until it actually comes

.And they'll do it again tomorrow

.And the next day

.And they call ME strange for writing in these notebooks

April 19, 2022

There was a woman crying on Platform 4 today. Not sobbing or making a scene. Just standing there, tears streaming down her face, looking straight ahead like nothing was .happening

Three hundred and seventeen people walked past her in the twenty-two minutes she stood .there. (Yes, I counted.) Not one stopped. Not one asked if she was okay

.I didn't either

What would I say? "Excuse me, I've been watching you cry from my booth for twenty-two  
"?minutes. Are you alright

.She'd probably call security

I wonder what happened to her. Bad breakup? Lost job? Dead relative? Or maybe nothing  
specific. Maybe just the weight of existing in this city, in this time, pushed her past some  
.invisible line

I understand that. Sometimes I sit in my apartment and feel like I'm being slowly crushed by  
.invisible hands

My apartment. Ha. Four walls, a bathroom, a hotplate. Bed that folds into the wall. One  
window looking at the brick wall of the building next door. Called the landlord about fixing the  
dripping sink six months ago. Still drips. I time my bathroom breaks to the drips now.  
.Thirty-seven drips and I know five minutes have passed

The journals take up most of the space. Seventeen of them now, stacked on the milk crates I  
.use as shelves. This one is number eighteen. Started in January. Already half full

Do other people keep journals? Real people, I mean. Not ticket booth freaks like me.  
.Probably not. They're too busy living lives to document them

.I'm not living. I'm watching

April 20, 2022

.He was there again today. The man with the leather briefcase

Every day, 8:47 AM. Like clockwork. Charcoal gray suit, immaculately pressed. Silver tie clip.  
Black leather oxfords, polished to a mirror shine. And the briefcase—expensive, worn at the  
.corners but well-maintained

.Sebastian. That's what I've named him. He looks like a Sebastian

.He's different from the others. He sees

Most people look through me. I'm part of the station architecture. A machine that dispenses  
tickets and occasional directions. "Where's the downtown train?" "Which way to Market  
.Street?" They ask without making eye contact, already walking away before I answer

But Sebastian sees me. He looks directly into my eyes when he buys his ticket. Just for a  
.second, but it's there—recognition. A slight nod

.He knows what I'm doing. He's doing it too

I've started to imagine his life. He lives alone, like me. But in one of those expensive high-rises downtown with floor-to-ceiling windows. Minimalist furniture. Everything in its place. He wakes up at precisely 6:30 AM. Makes his own coffee—something exotic and .complicated. Reads three newspapers before leaving his apartment at 8:22

What does he see when he looks at them? The crowd. Does he categorize them like I do?  
?Does he write it down when he gets home

.I want to ask him. I never will

April 21, 2022

The Thursday morning crowd is different from the Monday crowd. Mondays they're all grim determination and caffeine. By Thursday there's a resignation. Shoulders slumped just that .much more. Faces a little grayer

Fridays they perk up again. The promise of two days of freedom. As if two days could make .up for five

I started this... hobby? Obsession? Whatever this is... almost six years ago. I'd been working at the station for about a year. Before that I was night security at a warehouse downtown. Before that, retail. Before that... who cares? Nothing sticks to me. I'm like one of those plants .that grows without soil. An air plant. Just existing, feeding on dust in the atmosphere

The first journal was just a way to pass time. I'd count things. Women in red coats. Men with .mustaches. Children under five. Just numbers in columns

Then I started noting behaviors. How many people checked their watches within five minutes of arriving on the platform. How many pretended to text when they were really just staring at .blank screens to avoid eye contact

Then I started noticing individuals. Regulars. The ones who came through every day, same .time, same blank expressions. I started giving them names

Hat Lady. Always wears a hat, different one every day, but always coordinate with her shoes. .Arrives 8:03, Platform 2

Coffee Guy. Massive coffee, size of his head, different gourmet shop each day written on the .cup. Constantly checks his phone, walking without looking up somehow. 7:55, Platform 3

Briefcase Kid. Can't be more than 22, carries a briefcase bigger than he is. Trying so hard to .look professional but his suit never fits right. 8:17, Platform 1

When did it change from hobby to... this? When did I start bringing the journals home? When ?did I start waking up at night to write down observations I'd forgotten to record

.I know it's not normal. I know that

But what is normal about any of this? About thousands of people moving like automatons through the same space day after day, not seeing each other, not touching, not existing ?except as obstacles to be navigated around

.At least I SEE them

April 22, 2022

There was a fight on Platform 3 today. Not much of one. Two suits shoving each other, something about one stepping on the other's shoe. Over in thirty seconds

The interesting part wasn't the fight. It was everyone else. They all took three steps back, formed a perfect circle around the two men. Not to watch—most kept their eyes down or straight ahead—but to create space. Like white blood cells isolating an infection

When the fight ended—one guy just walked away, the other straightened his tie and pretended nothing happened—they all flowed back in, filling the space, resuming their positions

.No one said anything. No one made eye contact. The system healed itself

I wonder if they even realize they do it. I wonder if they realize they do anything. Sometimes .I think they're all sleepwalking and I'm the only one awake

.Sometimes I envy them

Michael stopped by my booth today. He's on maintenance. Fixes the turnstiles when they jam, replaces lightbulbs, that sort of thing. Only person here who ever talks to me beyond asking for tickets or directions

"?Fisher," he said, leaning against my booth. "You coming to Ryan's thing on Saturday"

.Ryan is the station manager. I've spoken to him maybe six times in four years

"?What thing"

".Retirement party. Forty years in the system. There's a thing at McGinty's. 7:00"

".I don't think I was invited"

Michael laughed. "Nobody's 'invited,' man. It's just a thing. Show up, buy the guy a beer, say ".congrats on escaping this hellhole

.I told him I'd think about it

.I won't go



I never go to these things. They all know each other, talk about sports and kids and TV shows I don't watch. I just stand in the corner clutching a beer I don't want, nodding and smiling at the right moments until I can slip away

.Michael knows I won't go. He keeps asking anyway. I don't know why

He's a good guy, Michael. Sixty-something, been working maintenance in the station since before I was born. Gray beard, always has grease on his hands. Never seems bothered by anything. He calls me "Fisher" like we're in the army or something

Sometimes he brings me coffee in the morning. Just sets it on the counter, nods, walks away. Never asks for anything. Never expects conversation

.I think maybe he gets it. The watching. The silence

April 23, 2022

Weekend crowd is different. Slower. Families. Tourists with maps. Teenagers in groups, laughing too loud, trying to fill the station with their presence

:Ticket sales are slower on weekends so I have more time to observe. Today I counted

people wearing sports team merchandise 47

couples holding hands 32

people who came up to my booth, then realized they had metro cards and walked away 13 without speaking

arguments between parents and children 7

(people who appeared to be intoxicated (at 10 AM 4

(buskers (guitarist, saxophone player, that guy who plays the plastic buckets 3

Sebastian 1

Yes, he came on a Saturday. Same time: 8:47 AM. Same suit, different color (navy instead of charcoal). Same briefcase

What business requires such precision seven days a week? Government? Finance? Or maybe he's not going to work at all. Maybe he's like me. Maybe the briefcase is full of notebooks

I almost asked him today. When he came to buy his weekend ticket (different from his "?weekday pass), I almost said, "What's in the briefcase, Sebastian

I didn't, of course. He isn't really Sebastian. He's just a man whose real name I don't know and never will. If I spoke to him, the illusion would shatter. He'd just be another irritated commuter, annoyed at the ticket guy for asking personal questions

Better to keep him as Sebastian in my head. Better to maintain the illusion that someone else out there is watching too

April 24, 2022

Sunday. Station half-empty. Ticket booth feels like a fishbowl on days like this. Too exposed.  
.Nothing to hide behind

I find myself watching the pigeons on days like this. They've learned the schedule better than most humans. They know exactly when someone might drop food at each platform. They know which trash cans get emptied when. They time their movements with incredible  
.precision

.The humans never notice them. The humans barely notice anything

This morning I watched a woman—red coat, blonde hair, about thirty—walk from the entrance to Platform 2 without looking up from her phone once. She navigated around people, sidestepped a wet spot on the floor, avoided a column, all without ever seeing any of  
?it. Muscle memory? Peripheral vision? Or some deeper sense that the rest of us have lost

I wonder what would happen if I moved all the benches three feet to the left. How many people would sit down in empty space before they realized the bench wasn't where it's  
?supposed to be

I've thought about conducting experiments. Subtle rearrangements. Changes to the environment to see who notices. But that would require after-hours access to the station,  
.and Ryan watches me closely enough as it is

.He thinks I'm odd. He's right

Sometimes I wonder what they say about me, the other employees. The ticket booth guy who never speaks, never joins them for drinks, just watches everyone with those weird pale  
.eyes

?Do they have a nickname for me? Creepy Ticket Guy? The Ghost? The Watcher

.That last one. I like that. The Watcher

I went back to my apartment after my shift and realized I hadn't spoken a single word all day. Not one. No one asked me for directions. No one needed a ticket explained. No one said  
.hello

.I tested my voice in the bathroom mirror to make sure it still worked

".Hello," I said to my reflection. "I see you"

.Stupid

April 25, 2022

.Monday again. Back to the rush. Back to the endless parade of blank faces and empty eyes

I saw a woman today who looked exactly like Jessica. Same hair, same walk, same way of tucking hair behind her ear. For a second I thought it was her, and my heart did that stupid little jump it always does when I think about her

But it wasn't Jessica. Jessica moved to Boston six years ago. Jessica is probably married with kids by now. Jessica stopped thinking about me approximately fifteen minutes after our last conversation

I wish my brain would get the message

It wasn't a bad breakup. That's the worst part. It was nothing. Just a slow fade, a gradual realization that we had nothing in common, nothing to say to each other. We didn't fight. We just... stopped

Like dead satellites still orbiting the earth. No power, no communication, just following the path of least resistance until gravity finally pulls us down and we burn up in the atmosphere

Sometimes I think that's what all these people are. Dead satellites. Still going through the motions, following their programmed paths, but with nothing inside. No real connection to each other or the world

Sebastian was late today. 8:52 instead of 8:47. It bothered me more than it should have. Five minutes shouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things, but it felt like a disruption in the natural order

?What delayed him? Spilled coffee? Missed alarm? A conversation that ran long

I found myself watching the entrance at 8:47, expecting him. By 8:50 I was genuinely worried. By 8:52 when he appeared, I felt relief wash over me like a physical sensation

Pathetic, I know. Building my day around the brief appearance of a stranger who doesn't know I exist. But aren't we all doing that in some way? Building our lives around people who never really see us

.At least I'm honest about it

April 26, 2022

I saw something new today. A child with hair like fire—bright red, almost unnatural. A little girl, maybe eight or nine, holding her mother's hand. They were standing on Platform 4, and the girl was staring directly at my booth

Not in the way children usually stare—vacant, bored, waiting to be somewhere else. She was looking right at me with an intensity I don't often see in adults, let alone children

She tugged her mother's sleeve and pointed at me. The mother glanced over, frowned slightly, then bent down to say something to the girl. The girl shook her head, still staring. Then their train came and they were gone

But that look. Like she could see right through the glass, right through my uniform, right  
.through my skin to whatever is underneath

.Children are like that sometimes. They haven't learned yet how to not see things

Sebastian was back on schedule today. 8:47 exactly. He nodded to me as he always does. I  
.almost thought I detected a slight smile, but it was probably just a trick of the light

My shift ended at 4:00, but I stayed in the station until 6:30, sitting on the bench across from  
my booth, watching. Nobody questioned me. Nobody noticed. In a uniform, you're invisible in  
.a different way

I watched the evening rush. Different from the morning. In the morning they're resigned, but  
determined. In the evening they're just... empty. Used up. They shuffle rather than stride.  
.They check their phones with less urgency. They stare into space more

?What happens to them up there, in those office towers? What drains them so completely

I've never worked in an office. Sometimes I imagine it—fluorescent lights, recycled air, the  
quiet click of keyboards. Meetings about meetings. Coffee that tastes like nothing. Small talk  
.about weather and sports with people you'd never choose to speak to otherwise

.Maybe I'm lucky. Maybe my glass booth is freedom compared to that

.Or maybe I tell myself that because this is all I have

April 27, 2022

The red-haired girl was back today. Same platform, same time, same mother. But today she  
.waved at me. A small, secret wave, just a flutter of fingers

I didn't wave back. I didn't know what to do, so I just stared. She didn't seem bothered. She  
.smiled, wide and genuine, then turned to say something to her mother

I wonder what she told her mother about me yesterday. "Mommy, why is that man watching  
".everyone?" And what did the mother say? "Don't stare, honey. He's just doing his job

?Is that what I'm doing? My job

No one hired me to fill these notebooks. No one asked me to catalog the daily movements of  
strangers. No one cares that I can describe from memory the exact shade of Sebastian's  
.oxfords or the pattern on Hat Lady's scarf collection

?So why do I do it

I've asked myself that question a thousand times. I don't have a good answer. All I know is  
that if I stopped—if I just sold tickets and gave directions and went home to watch TV like a

normal person—something essential would be lost. Some critical observation that only I can  
.make. Some pattern that only I can see

It sounds grandiose when I write it down. Like I think I'm on some noble mission, discovering  
.the secrets of human behavior from inside a ticket booth

?But what if I am? What if no one else is LOOKING

I know how it started. The counting. The categorizing. Small ways to pass time in a  
monotonous job. But when did it become... necessary? When did I start feeling like the world  
would spin off its axis if I didn't record the number of blue umbrellas on rainy days or track  
?Sebastian's precise arrival times

Maybe I'm just justifying my own isolation. Maybe this is just the story I tell myself to make  
.sense of a life spent watching other people live instead of living myself

But then I look at them—the endless parade of blank faces—and I think: Are they really  
living? Or are they just moving through space, following paths laid out for them, never  
?deviating, never truly seeing what's around them

.At least I SEE

.At least somebody's watching

April 28, 2022

There was a brief power outage at the station today. Just forty-seven seconds (I counted),  
.but it was enough to disrupt everything

The emergency lights came on, casting everything in an eerie blue glow. The constant  
background noise—announcements, turnstiles clicking, the low hum of fluorescent lights—all  
.stopped at once

And for forty-seven seconds, everyone froze. Conversations halted mid-sentence.  
Movement ceased. Everyone just stood where they were, looking around uncertainly, as if  
.they'd forgotten what to do without the machine telling them

All except Sebastian. He continued walking, briefcase in hand, straight to my booth. Through  
the blue emergency lighting, his eyes met mine, and I swear he smiled. Not the phantom  
.smile I thought I saw yesterday. A real smile. Small but definite

Then the power came back on, and everything resumed as if nothing had happened.  
Conversations picked up from the exact word they'd left off. Bodies in motion returned to  
.motion. The system restarted

.But Sebastian was gone. I didn't see him exit. He was just... gone

And I realized something. In all these months of watching him, I've never seen him board a train. I've never seen where he goes after he buys his ticket from me

?He comes in at 8:47. Buys his ticket. Nods to me. And then... what

'Tomorrow I'm going to follow him. I

## CHAPTER TWO: RECURRING FACES

From the journals of Thomas Fisher

April 29, 2022

.Didn't follow Sebastian today

Meant to. Had it all planned. Signal Michael, step outta my booth, blend in with everybody else. But when the moment came—when Sebastian showed up at exactly 8:47, bought his ticket, gave me that little nod—I just... froze. Stood there like an idiot watching him walk away

What was I afraid of? That I'd follow him and find out he's just some boring businessman with a normal life? Or worse, that he'd turn around, catch me following him and be like "What the hell are you doing, ticket guy

Nah. I was scared of breaking my own rules. The unspoken deal between me and them. I watch from my little glass cage. They walk by, oblivious. That's how it works. Only way it CAN work

.Plus I've been getting sloppy. Not keeping proper records. Not sticking to the system

.The system matters. It's all that matters

April 30, 2022

Spent all night reorganizing the notebooks. All 18 of em. Didn't realize how messy they'd gotten. My handwriting's getting worse too. Chicken scratch

:My system works like this

I categorize the regulars by platform, when they show up, and something unique about em. Each one gets a code in my shorthand. Like

P2-0803-HL = Platform 2, 8:03 AM, Hat Lady

P3-0755-CG = Platform 3, 7:55 AM, Coffee Guy

P1-0817-BK = Platform 1, 8:17 AM, Briefcase Kid

Sebastian is P4-0847-LB (Leather Briefcase). Red-haired girl doesn't have a real code yet.  
.She's not regular enough. Doesn't fit any pattern I can figure

Started cross-referencing too. Keeping track of who acknowledges who. Who deliberately avoids who. How people's body language changes when certain regulars share the same  
.space

Like, Coffee Guy and Hat Lady never talk to each other—at least not that I've seen—but they always keep exactly about 7 feet between them when they're on the same platform. Not close enough to seem like friends, but not so far that they seem like they're avoiding each  
.other either

Coincidence? Maybe. Or maybe there's something there. Old coworkers? Neighbors who  
?don't really like each other? Ex-lovers keeping a safe distance